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Digital Literature

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Rationale for adding Digital Literature to Introduction to Poetry

Even before taking this digital literature class, I recognized that the medium in which poetry is being presented has been changing. My students at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore facilitated this awareness by introducing me to the “poetry slam” about 10 years ago. Since then, a poetry organization has been formed on campus by the students which gathers monthly for an open mic night allowing budding artists an opportunity to perform their works in front of an audience. I see a definite change in the tide from the previous, typical, text based poem that existed in decontextualized silence to a return of a more oral tradition that often involves audience interaction and technology previously not used in the genre. It is my sincere hope that by adding a sampling of electronic literature to my Introduction to Poetry class, that it will encourage students to push the envelope of their creativity so that their unique perspectives have another medium in which to be expressed.

Keeping in mind that my students are undergraduates and have varying degrees of computer competency and varying degrees of exposure to what constitutes Digital Literature, I wanted to use Week 9 in the syllabus as a transition point. During this week, all the texts we will read will still be in traditional format, but students will need to view and read them on the web.

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Each poem has a corresponding piece of art that shares the same title, and in all cases, this art was created to match with the original text, although sometimes the painting preceded the poem (like Monet’s Water lilies). I have also chosen music that corresponds to each text and image: in “Starry Night’s” case, the song by Don McLean was written about the painting and the artist. In “The Lady of Shallot,” Loreena McKennit sings the original poem by Tennyson and sets it to a musical score, and “Watermark,” although not directly about Monet’s paintings, portrays the mood captured in both the paintings and the poem. I hope to use these pieces to initiate students into the idea of the connections possible between text, image, and sound.

In Week 10, I have chosen three relatively simple pieces to represent Digital Literature. I chose these pieces in particular because I thought my students would find all of them accessible, even if they had some initial trepidation about the experience, and I thought they would be able to relate to them and thus, be able and willing to talk about them in class. I chose *Strings* to start the unit because of the simple navigation, the animation on the screen, and the relatively simple concept that the text illustrates. The words act out the underlined term on the screen. The next piece, *The Last Days of Betty Nkomo*, was chosen because it complicates the simplicity of the experience of *Strings* by adding sound and flashing, fast moving text. I think this will help to prevent students from making sweeping generalizations early on about what constitutes the genre. I also put this piece here to show the way some authors choose to end their work since many of the works end when the reader gets tired of the experience and quits. Like death itself, the abrupt ending of this piece takes away any control that the reader might have over the ending. Week 10 concludes with Storyland because it brings everything together (sound, color,

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animation) with the addition of recombinant text. I imagine that students will have a good time “creating” the various stories and puzzling over the possible meaning of each line and how it relates, or doesn’t relate to the next. I could even envision this piece as being useful in my composition class as a framework for an underdeveloped essay where students need to “flesh out” the points that are given in order to create a coherent, meaningful story. It would be a good way to teach the necessity of connecting ideas through the use of transitional sentences.

Week 11 shifts the focus to more interactive pieces that contain what I perceive as an inherent gender bias. The first two pieces, *Fitting the Pattern*, and *Pieces of Herself*, were deliberately chosen as “feminine works,” partially because I really liked both of them and partially because I want to test to see if my students identify works of digital literature as gendered and if so, to see if we can list the criteria they are using to make the distinction between masculine and feminine pieces. For example, is it just subject matter? i.e. if *Fitting the Pattern* were about how to fish, and the relationship between a father and son, would men enjoy it more and if so, why? Will my students even perceive a gender bias? In 2014, do 19-23 year old men feel odd interacting with a piece that involves sewing tools that in prior centuries have been strictly relegated to women? Do today’s women of the same age bracket feel odd about it as well? If so, from what does this reaction stem? I ended the week and the mini-unit with *Radio Salience* because the piece seems decidedly masculine in comparison to the previous two. *Radio Salience* is the most complex, involving the visual recognition of patterns that reveal a text that seemingly has nothing to do with the unified image that produced it. I think students will embrace the challenge of trying to find the patterns and be amused by the messages they get

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when they “die” in the process. The many possible combinations should give us ample opportunity to discuss what meaning can be derived from the piece, if any.

In short, I wanted to make this introduction fun, not overwhelming. I hope it will encourage further curiosity about the genre and that it will eventually result in the development of a strictly Digital Literature course. The mini-unit also serves a selfish purpose in that I have some experiments that I would like to conduct with my students. I feel that the incorporation of the material into the regular syllabus will refresh the course and inspire student participation. I look forward to getting out of the textbook and exploring, with my students, this whole new world.